

**Original Research Article**

## Pratihara Art Uncovered: Newly Found Sculptures in Dhodiya, Ashoknagar, MP

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Received: 23 December, 2025 | Accepted: 27 December, 2025 | Published: 30 December, 2025

**Abstract:** *Dhodiya* village is located in *Mungaoli* tehsil of *Ashoknagar* district in Madhya Pradesh, India. It is situated 42km away from the Tahsil headquarter *Mungaoli*. The archaeological explorations and excavations carried out at various sites in the region take back the existence of man here from the prehistoric age. In the sixth century BC, this region was under Avanti *Mahajanapada*. In later periods, this region remained under the rule of various dynasties, including *Śiśunaga*, *Nanda*, *Maurya*, *Śuṅga*, *Sātavāhana*, *Shaka*, *Gupta*, *Gurjara-Pratihar*, *Rashtrakut* and *Parmar*. During the *Maurya*, *Gupta*, and *Parmar* periods, there was unprecedented development of Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu sculptural art in the *Mungaoli* region. During archaeological exploration, about 15 sculptures have been found in the *Dhodia* village which belong to the *Gurjara-Pratihar* period (Mid-10<sup>th</sup> century C.E.). These images represent the importance of religion, art, and culture in this region.

**Keywords:** *Dhodiya*, *Mungaoli*, *Tumen*, *Gurjara-Pratihar*, *Paramara*, Sculpture, *Malwa*

**Introduction:** *Dhodiya* village (24°25'23.3"N 77°55'24.4"E) is located in *Mungaoli* tehsil of *Ashoknagar* district in Madhya Pradesh, India. It is situated at a distance of 42 km from *Mungaoli Tehsil* Headquarters and 40 km from District Headquarters *Ashoknagar*. The area of the district is 4673.94 square km. The Betwa River in the east of the district irrigates this region and separates it from the Lalitpur district of Uttar Pradesh and the Sagar district of Madhya Pradesh. *Vidisha* district is situated in the south. In the west of the district is the Sindh River which separates it from *Guna* district. *Shivpuri* district is located in the north. Evidence of the richness of the culture of all

Indian religions is found in the *Mungaoli* region since the Maurya period. Stupas, temples, and sculptures have been found at the nearby place *Tuman* which belongs to the Gupta to the Parmar period. Images of *Pratihar* styles have been found in the explored village of *Dhodiya*.

**Historic background:** Archaeological explorations carried on in certain parts of Ashoknagar District have led to the discovery of some early stone-age tools. *Kadwaha* and *Mahua* villages have given traces of handaxes, cleavers, choppers, etc.<sup>1</sup> The bed of the river Betwa near village *Gonchi*, about three and a half km. from *Mungaoli* railway station has yielded a large number of tools.<sup>2</sup> Another locality called *Chachauda* has yielded late Stone Age tools.<sup>3</sup> There are some ancient sites like *Kadwaha*, *Chanderi*, etc. in the *Ashoknagar* District.

The early history of *Ashoknagar* District is wrapped in obscurity. Towards the close of the seventh century B.C., when Indian history assumed some definite shape, the country was divided into several states, mostly independent. The Buddhist texts refer to the existence of sixteen *Mahajanapadas* or great states of considerable extent, shortly before the time of Gautam Buddha, Prominent among monarchies were those of Avanti, Vatsa, Kosala and Magadha, all aspiring for absolute sovereignty. Avanti, the powerful kingdom, is supposed to have then corresponded roughly to modern Malwa, *Nimar* and the adjoining parts of Madhya Pradesh.<sup>4</sup> *Ashoknagar* District thus appears to have formed a part of Avanti kingdom founded by *Chanda Pradyota Mahasena*. In the 4th century B.C.E. Magadha destroyed the power of the *Pradyota* of Avanti, according to the Puranas (Majumdar, R. C. 1952, p.96).<sup>5</sup> Thus, *Shishunaga* added the kingdom of Avanti, which included *Ashoknagar* District, to the growing empire of Magadha. This region continued to be under the succeeding dynasties of the *Shishunagas*, the *Nandas*' and the Mauryas. The Mauryas probably put this part of the country in their important viceroyalty of Ujjain, mostly in charge of princes. The region probably remained under the Mauryas, till about 187 B.C. when king *Brihadratha*, the last of the Maurya kings, was murdered treacherously, by his General, *Pushyamitra* Sunga the founder of the Sunga dynasty. *Pushyamitra* was the de facto ruler of the Avanti region, even in the time of the Mauryas.<sup>6</sup> The *Sungas* ruled over the remnant *Magadhan* Empire, which was in the rapid process of disintegration. *Pushyamitra*'s rule is said to have extended as far as *Vidisha* it not further to the west.<sup>7</sup> After the *Sungas*, this region came under the control of *Shri Satakarni*, after which it came under the *Nahapana*, subsequently, *Gautamiputra Satakarni* conquered *Nahapana*. Thus, there was a continuous struggle between the *Sakas* and the *Satavahanas* for power over this region. By this time, we also find *Nagas* whose branches rose to eminence in regions around *Vidisha*, *Mathura*, *Kantipuri*, and *Padmavati*.<sup>8</sup> This dynasty of *Nagas*, according to the puranas, had nine kings. A number of coins bearing the name *Maharaja Ganendra* or *Ganpati* have been discovered in the adjoining *Vidisha* district as well as *Padamavati* and *Mathura*.<sup>9</sup>

In the middle of the fourth century C.E. this territory was conquered by the Gupta emperor *Samudra Gupta*. According to the Allahabad Pillar Inscription, *Samudra Gupta* vanquished two *Naga* ruler *Ganapatinaga* and *Nagsena* along with other.<sup>10</sup> During the reign of *Kumargupta I* village *Tumain*, (Tahsil *Mungaoli*), the ancient *Tumba Vana*, has yielded an inscription of the reign of this king. It is dated in the year 435 C.E. It records that *Ghatotkacha* (Gupta), probably younger brother or son of *Kumar Gupta I* was then the Governor of *Tumba Vana*. This region continued to be under the rule of the Guptas probably till the year 467-468 C.E.

Around 500 C.E. Malwa re-emerged from the dissolving Gupta empire as a separate kingdom; in 528 C.E. *Yashodharman* of Malwa defeated the *Hunas*, who had invaded India from the north-west. Both western and Eastern Malwa passed to *Kalchuris* by 608 C.E. It appears that *Harsha* succeeded in subduing these *Kalchuris* who are found to have risen again to power in eastern M.P. a few centuries later.

In 606 C.E., Harsh ascended the throne in the Vardhan dynasty of *Thaneshwar*, Harsh's empire included the region up to the Narmada River in North India, which certainly included this District.<sup>11</sup> In the early stages of the eighth century, the *Gurjara-Pratiharas* entered Malwa. They established a stronghold, but in 758 this region was captured by the Rashtrakuta king *Dantidurga* of Deccan and performed *Hiranyagarbha Yajna* in Ujjain.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the Rashtrakutas had ruled over this region for some years. *Gurjara-Pratiharas* also established their supremacy in Malwa in the eighth century but after a few years, the *Rashtrakuta* king *Dhrub* regained control. There was a struggle for supremacy between the *Rashtrakutas* and *Gurjara-Pratiharas*. After Indra III in 927 C.E., the *Pratiharas* came under the control of Malwa, which continued till 946 AD. The Rashtrakutas had appointed the *Paramaras* as governors in Malwa. During Munj's reign, *Malwa* became the core territory of the *Paramara* empire and Dhara (Dhar) developed as the capital of the *Paramara* empire. The *Paramara* dynasty reached its zenith under King Bhoj, whose kingdom extended from *Chittor* in the north to Konkan in the south and from the Sabarmati River in the west to Vidisha in the east. The *Paramara* ruler Bhoj was a great patron of Art. Last powerful ruler of *Paramara* dynasty was *Udyaditya*. He was followed by a number of other *Paramara* kings. Thus, Ashoknagar could be said to have been a part if the *Paramara* kingdom till the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

**Previous Research work:-** *Mungaoli* region is rich for its archaeological wealth on which some research work has also been done. Excavations were carried out at *Tumen* near this site in 1972 under the direction of K D Bajpai of Dr Hari Singh Gour University, Sagar. Many objects of archaeological importance have been recovered from the excavation. It has revealed the existence of two stupas in *Tumen*. In the same excavation potteries were found belonging to the period from 5th century B.C. to 5th century C.E. It was also revealed that the inhabitants of this area knew the art of making bricks from stone to build their residence. Other items, excavated, are Brahmanical and Jain statues, utensils, walls, stone well, pillars, decorated door frames etc. Among the statues mention may be made of *Revanta*, *Sun*, *Ganesha*, *Vidhyadhara*, *Sapta-Matrika*, *Balarama* and *Sarvato-Bhadra*.<sup>13</sup> MP Garde's book A Handbook of Gwalior details this region's art and architecture. Several Ph.D. has been done on the art culture of this region in Sagar and Gwalior Universities.

Village-to-village archaeological exploration of *Mungaoli* tehsil was done by the author, in which many statues belonging to the 10<sup>th</sup> century C.E. were found in *Dhodiya* village. These sculptures made on of the *Gurjara-Pratihar* style. The details of which are as follows -

**Bhairav:-** The deity stands in the *sthanak* posture and *Dwibhangha* state. He is wearing a simple Jatamukuta on his head, earrings in his ears, a necklace and snake around his neck and a waistband around his waist. *Bhairav* is naked and he has his left hand in his waist and a dagger in his other hand. There is a mosaic of excellent art on the legs below the waist. The Idol measures 85 cm in height, 38cm Width, and Thickness is 18 cm. (Fig. 1)

**Ganesha:** - This sculpture is of *Ganesha* engraved on simple sandstone. *Ganesha* is standing in *Sthanaka* posture. The figure is devoid of head and forearms. *Ganesha* is wearing *Katibandha*, *Yajnopavita*, and *Padbandha*. The torso remains only about 45 in height. (Fig. 2)



Fig. 1 - Bhairav



Fig. 2 - Ganesha



Fig. 3 - Vishnu

**Vishnu:** - Vishnu has been sculpted in a four-armed form but only two hands are safe and the remaining two arms are broken. He is wearing a *kiritamukuta* on his head, earrings in his ears, a necklace, and *yajnopavita*. Vishnu has a chakra in his left hand and a mace in his right hand. Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva are depicted on the top of *Parikar*. The lower part of the figure has been broken. This figure of Vishnu measures 44 cm in height and 46 cm in width. (Fig. 3)

**Ganesha:** - Lord Ganesha is depicted in the *Sthanak* posture, adorned with a crown, *Supakarna*, and *Yajnopavit*. He has four arms, holding the *modak* in its left hand and trying to eat it by picking it up from the trunk, with only one visible tooth. In his upper right hand, he grasps a *Parshu*, while his lower right- hand holds a snake, and his lower left- hand cradles the *Modak*. The Idol measures 75 cm in height, 41cm Width, and Thickness is 26 cm. (Fig. 4)



Fig. 4 – Ganesh

**Trideva Patta:** - This idol would have been installed in a *rathika* (miniature shrine) on the temple's outer wall. The figures of the Trinity and Durga have been carved in this architectural fragment. The images have been engraved in three parts on the piece of stone. In the upper part, Shiva is engraved in the sitting posture. In the second part, four handed Brahma and Vishnu in standing posture are depicted and the goddess Durga is riding on a lion. The third part contains the number of *Ganas*. The eroded sculpture measures 75 cm in height, 41cm Width, and Thickness is 26 cm. (Fig. 5)



Fig. 5 – Trideva and Durga

**Skanda:** - The sculpture is of Shiva's son *Skanda* standing in *Samabhanga* posture. He is wearing a crown with three crests on his head, earrings in his ears, a garland around his neck, armlets, and a waist belt (*katimekhala*). He has arms, holding *shakti* in his right hand while left hand is broken. His vehicle Mayur is shown below the feet. (Fig. 6)



Fig. 6 – Skanda

**Shivalinga:** - This *Linga* is a *Manusha Linga*, which means this class of *lingas* consists of those set up by human hands. It has three distinct parts, as described in Shilpa texts; *Brahma-Bhaga*, *Vishnu-Bhaga*, and *Rudra-Bhaga*. The lowest part which is square in section is known as *Brahma-bhaga*, the middle of the octagonal section is known as *Vishnubhaga*, and the circular section at the top is known as *Rudrabhaga*. The lengths of these parts vary with the different classes of *lingas*. In *Vardhamana Linga*, the proportion of *Brahma Bhaga*, *Vishnu Bhag*, and *Rudra Bhaga* is 4, 5, and 6 in ascending order of length. According to the length of the parts, it is *Vardhaman Linga*. The *Linga* does not have a *Jalahari* and was installed singly. Its total height is approximately 85 cm. (Fig. 7)



Fig. 7 – Shiva Lingam

**Ganesha:** - *Ganesha's* head and trunk are decorated with ornaments. He has huge ears of which only one is left. He has four arms, holding *modak* in his left hand, the remaining arms are broken. His trunk is clockwise. There is a *yajnopavita* (sacred thread) around the neck. One of his teeth is visible. Based on the iconographic features of the image, this image appears to belong to the *Pratihara* period.

**Vishnu:** - A figure of Vishnu made of sandstone has been found. Vishnu is in *Sthanaka* posture. The lower parts of the mouth and legs are broken. Vishnu is four-armed and has weapons like *Shankha*, disc, Mace, and lotus. The idol is wearing earrings, necklace around the neck, *Katimekhala* and *Vanamekhala*.

**Sati Pillar (1):** - Four Sati pillars of 11th and 13th century C.E. have been found from this site. One of these is this ancient Sati pillar which is dated and has an inscription engraved in Nagari script of dated V. S. 1193 (1136 C.E.) and, mentions the name of *Vasiladev*. Shivalinga has been shown in the pillar. The Sun and Moon are depicted in the upper part. (Fig. 8)



Fig. 8- Sati Pillar

**Sati Pillar (2-4):** - Sati pillar is a monument usually erected as a memorial to honor the memory of a deceased person, often a woman. Two Sati pillars are made of local sandstone and is in good condition. The pillars have been carved by dividing a stone into four parts. In the upper part, the Sun and Moon along with a pot and raised hands

are depicted, which symbolize the memory and fame of the deceased woman. In the second part, prayers are being made for the peace of the soul of the deceased by worshiping Shiva *Linga*. In the third part, the deceased is being worshipped. The scene of women is depicted in the fourth part. The third pillar is almost the same as the second pillar, the difference is that in the third part of the third pillar, there is a war scene that shows that the husband of the deceased woman is martyred in the war. (Fig. 9-10) Architectural fragments of the temple structure have been found at the site. Figures of *Bhairav* and *dikpals* like Agni have been carved on these architectural fragments.

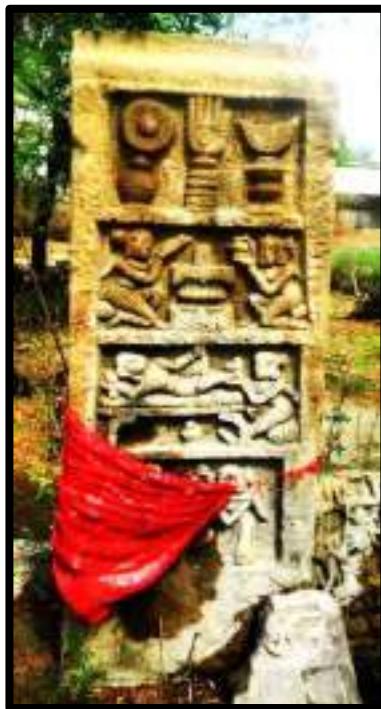


Fig. 9: Sati Pillar



Fig. 10: Sati Pillar

## Conclusion

*Mungaoli* region has been the center of religious activities since the Maurya period. Eran, situated in the nearby district of Sagar, served as the provincial capital of Samudragupta and emerged as a hub of exceptional artistic achievement during this era. Inscriptions of notable rulers such as Samudragupta, Budhgupta, and Bhanugupta have been unearthed from this site, further underscoring its historical. Inscriptions of Kumargupta's son Ghatokachagupta and numerous Brahmin and Jain sculptures from the Gupta period have been unearthed in Tumain, located near this site.<sup>14</sup> In the sixth century C.E. the Maitrakas of Valbhi, Gurjara-Pratiharas, Maukhari, Kalachuris and the Later Guptas struggling for sovereignty in this region.

The Iconographic features of these sculptures found in *Dholiya* village of *Mungaoli* tehsil are of the *Pratihar* period. This proves that the *Pratihar* dynasty ruled this region around the 9th century C.E. In the 9th century AD, *Pratihar* rulers Nagabhattit II and Bhoj-I had control over this region. Some distinctive features of these *Pratihara*'s sculptures are: elongated body, less ornamentation and a typical hair style, oval face, long earlobes, thick lips, less drapery, less depiction on the stele, lesser number of attendants with major deities etc. The figures are fuller and more rounded and the posture is more pronounced. Richly jeweled costumes, head dresses and facial feature are clearly sculpted in *Pratihara* art. These images represent the importance of religion, art, and culture in this region. The *Mattamayura* sect of *Shaivacharyas* (Saiva Saints) has been active in this region since ancient times, many of whose pre-medieval monasteries are available in nearby *Kadwaha*.

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